

Reflections on a Degree Initiative: the UK's Birmingham Royal Ballet dancers enter the University of Birmingham

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DOI:

[10.1080/14647890308304](https://doi.org/10.1080/14647890308304)

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Benn, T 2003, 'Reflections on a Degree Initiative: the UK's Birmingham Royal Ballet dancers enter the University of Birmingham', *Research in Dance Education*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 5-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647890308304>

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Reflections on a degree initiative: UK's Birmingham

Royal Ballet Dancers enter Birmingham University

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ABSTRACT

The paper provides an opportunity to share experiences and perceptions of the first five years of a degree programme for professional dancers. A partnership developed in the mid 1990s between the UK's Birmingham Royal Ballet and the University of Birmingham, Westhill (now School of Education), to provide a part-time, post-experience, flexible study programme for full-time Company dancers. This is the first 'company customised' higher education programme to dovetail studies around rehearsal, performance and touring schedules. Methodology is based on a narrative by the author, informed by ongoing internal and external evaluations, in-depth interviews with dancers and Company managers, documentation and secondary sources. Outcomes indicate that the programme has made a positive difference to the Company, to the dancers and to the wider education and dance / arts world.

Reflections on a degree initiative:

UK's Birmingham Royal Ballet Dancers enter Birmingham University

The introduction of this course has been a landmark in the development of dance education and the benefits that are being generated for dance, the arts and education will ripple outwards for many years.

Bannerman (2000)

The course being referred to is a degree programme for dancers of Birmingham Royal Ballet which was launched in September 1997 (Clarke, 1997). A partnership between Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB) and the University of Birmingham, led to the first customised higher education opportunity for dancers in the UK's second largest ballet company. The considerable knowledge and skills gained in the training and professional lives of leading ballet artists would be recognised as a spring-board for entering higher education on a part-time, post-experience programme. The only way in which the aspirations of these full-time dancers to enter higher education could be met would be through 'customised' delivery, dovetailed with the schedule of the Company:

No other large professional dance company in the world offers its members the option of participating in a course of study tailored to fit the demands of a performing company.

Clarke (1997:19)

Although there have been other examples of access opportunities for professional dancers to higher education programmes, for example Fordham College New York (Bristow, 1998), access to programmes and customised provision are not the same. This paper focuses on the first five years of the BRB / Birmingham University partnership since the programme's inception in 1997. It is a narrative by the author, that is an account informed

by the personal experiences of being programme leader, and by primary and secondary sources which were: interviews with dancers (coded D1 – D12), and senior Company managers, documentation such as letters and written evaluations, and other published work focusing on the programme.

NARRATIVE RESEARCH

The increasing popularity of narratives in social science research opens new opportunities for research methods, and textual forms (Richardson, 2000, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, Sparkes, 2002). For example, method developments encourage greater reflexivity, that is interpretation of experiences, reflection on the importance of position, historical and cultural situation, personal investments and biases in the research. The emergence of new textual forms have resulted from increased awareness of the importance of ‘product’ in research and what Denzin and Lincoln (2000) call the fifth, sixth and seventh moments of twentieth century development in qualitative research: experimental, postexperimental and future moments. Sparkes (2002) calls this the ‘shifting social science landscape of recent years’ resulting in increasing acceptance of diverse forms with: “... confessional tales, autoethnographies, poetic representations, ethnodrama and ethnographic fiction as alternative and legitimate ways for qualitative researchers to represent their findings” (Sparkes 2002:3). One problem is that rates of acceptance of new ideas into the well-guarded ranks of academia vary and whilst Denzin and Lincoln (2000) regard them as well established in sociology and anthropology, the rate of change has not been as rapid in all disciplines (Ibid:7). But, researchers have been exploring new territories, writing authors ‘into’ instead of ‘out of’ texts and confronting contentious issues such as representation and legitimization. Bochner (2001: 134 – 135) captures the essence of the ‘narrative turn’:

The narrative turn moves from a singular, monolithic conception of social science toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and towards meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories.

Such challenge to traditional research conventions has not happened without criticism. It legitimises the use of ‘I’, single case studies, is not generalizable, can be akin to biography, blurs the boundaries between social science and literature and stresses the journey rather than analysis, explanation or theorising (Ellis and Bochner 2000). But competing discourses and growing acceptance¹ is creating new spaces for researchers, which bring both opportunity and challenge. Whilst this paper does not stray too far from a more traditional ‘*realist tale*’ (Van Maanan, 1988, Sparkes 2002), using inductive analysis in which perspectives of others are most visible, it does include elements of ‘narrative of the self’ or

‘autoethnography’ which recognise the lived experiences of the author. As Ellis and Bochner (2000:746) suggest: “Life and narrative are inextricably connected. Life both anticipates telling and draws meaning from it. Narrative is both about living and part of it.”

The intention of using predominantly inductive analysis in this realist tale was to strengthen the account of the journey through breadth of perspectives. Acknowledging the position of the author as leader of the degree programme, totally immersed in its design, implementation and evaluation at all stages of the journey through the last five years hopefully enriches the reality of the narrative. Two key factors related to the significance of the dancers' degree programme were identified at the launch of the course by Bannerman (1997: 161):

The first is to note the great changes in education which have allowed this degree to be developed. Higher education has grown to embrace dance as a valid and valuable part of human knowledge. The second is to recognise the importance of this initiative for the development of dance in Britain, in particular for the development of ballet as an Art form and as an activity with value as an agent of learning and of personal development.

CONTEXT

There is much political good-will currently for notions of widening participation, lifelong learning and continuing professional development (CPD), including the Arts world. Ballet dancers often make vocational choices around the age of eleven years from which time maximising performance capability denies traditional entry into further or higher education. Early dance specialisation has been criticised for being: “too narrow and

¹ For example through academic journals: ‘Qualitative Inquiry’, ‘The Sociological Quarterly’, ‘International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education’, ‘Journal of Contemporary Ethnography’, ‘Qualitative Sociology’, ‘Qualitative Studies in Psychology’ and ‘Qualitative Research’ cited Sparkes (2002:2).

technical in focus and (tending) to ignore the wider personal development of the individual” (Birch 1998: 44). Then, once dancers make it into the profession, career patterns are ‘high risk’ in terms of stability of jobs, injury, and sustainability. Re-employment opportunities within companies are limited and the majority of dancers are faced with finding new beginnings in identity and life direction. (Ibid.) These moments can lead to feelings of exclusion, loss of sense of purpose and financial insecurity. Dancers are forced to leave behind the ‘all-consuming’ passion for performance that they needed to reach the top as dancers in the first place. Succeeding in continuing education, becoming interested in learning, can help to move people through difficult life phases, since education’s: “... agenda of empowerment is important for everyone, at all ages and life circumstances.” Carlton and Soulsby (1999:11). Many dancers do not have positive self-esteem or feelings of empowerment. The dance profession, particularly ballet, is much criticised for traditional training methods that do not empower learners (Buckroyd 2000). Dancers, then, have much to gain from new opportunities in education, and through them the dance world can benefit. Training for the ballet profession demands a dedication and focus often belied by the beauty and efficiency of the artists’ skills. ‘Outsiders’, those who have never experienced the rigour of the art form’s technical and artistic demands, rarely fully appreciate the years of commitment and extraordinary lifestyles of these people. Dancers who are successful might consider their commitment to be well rewarded in terms of an exciting career, sense of achievement, national and international status and global opportunities. But, with the exception of biographies produced for commercial interest, little is known about dancers’ ‘insider’ life-experiences or post-career opportunities. It is rare for professional dancers to enter the realms of critical, reflective thinking fostered in higher education, yet this is a direction which has the greatest potential to impact on a traditionally silent world.

As is evidenced in this paper, entry into higher education can make a difference by improving dancers' life chances, through empowerment, post-performing career opportunities and personal development, as well as enhancing the education and arts world in positive ways.

DEVISING THE PROGRAMME

The idea began with the head of education at Birmingham Royal Ballet in the mid 1990s. She saw her role as, not only to disseminate the work of the Company via the traditional education and community routes, but reciprocally, to bring educational opportunities in for the continuing personal, and professional, development of Company members (Hackett 1998:4).

The course content was negotiated between staff at the University and BRB, to utilise and extend the dancers' 'work-place' knowledge whilst extending them in broader intellectual directions. The structure for the course was built on an existing University framework for part-time, post-experience study, originally devised for non-graduate teachers, the Advanced Certificate in Education (one year of study), Bachelor of Philosophy (two years), and Master of Arts (three years) degree framework. The rationale of the programme was to enable working artists to develop and apply their considerable knowledge and experience to issues beyond the professional theatre, for example in education and community contexts. The first year was planned to focus on three modules that related to the work of the education department: dance in education, dance in the community and a project-led outreach dance module. In the second year the programme was designed to challenge these essentially practitioner-based professionals to apply academic disciplines

such as philosophy of the arts, sociology and empirical research techniques, to increasing knowledge and understanding of their much under-researched professional world.

COHORTS

Ten dancers embarked on the programme in 1997. The cohort included representation from across ranks in the Company from Artist to Principal dancers, five men and five women, four Americans and six English dancers. Years in the profession ranged from 6 to 22 with a wealth of transnational experience including San Francisco Ballet, Dance Theatre Harlem, New York and Stuttgart Ballet. Some had been with Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet prior to the re-location when the company became The Birmingham Royal Ballet in 1990. It was a remarkable achievement of stability in an unstable world that all ten dancers stayed for the full three years. The second cohort started in 2000 with eleven students and a wider 'international field' including dancers from Romania, Italy, Austria, Spain, America, Australia, Poland, Scotland, England and China. The second cohort has used the flexibility of the degree structure more diversely. Three left early in the first year for different personal reasons, one of them joining Rambert Dance Company. Two students took the ACE qualification after the first year, one because her career was developing rapidly with many new opportunities, the other because he wanted to use the credit certificate to join a distance learning sports programme with an American University. His post-performing ambitions lay outside the dance world:

I took on the programme because I was a high school drop-out and needed a passport into further education ... my goal has been accomplished. I have found this course incredibly valuable and beneficial to me ... (D11)

Two other dancers are finishing at the B.Phil level this October as they both move into new careers and three are continuing for their Masters year.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROGRAMME

As programme leader, finding a way through the demands of managing a customised programme has been challenging and rewarding. For example, it has been challenging to respond to the inevitable crisis management that happens in the Arts world, to a schedule that bears no resemblance to traditional academic years and to unusual student-working patterns that demand tutor flexibility. The degree studies are managed around the Company's Birmingham based rehearsal and performance schedules as well as the regular national and international touring schedules which have included Bradford, Plymouth, Sunderland and Salford, South Africa, Hong Kong and America, since 1997.

It has been rewarding to witness, for both cohorts, the dancers' rapid development in confidence, mastery of skills such as oral presentations, assignment writing and ICT, development as critical and reflective thinkers and abilities to contribute in new and exciting ways to both their Company and the wider world. What I will remember most is the privilege of coming to know and respect a group of people totally dedicated to their careers with a capacity for work that seems unparalleled.

For the students, without doubt the opportunity to focus on dance in education and community contexts changed the way in which they appreciated the value of artists

involved in outreach projects and ways in which the lives of others can be enhanced through access to their art form:

I think the 'applied dance' nature of the course has given us the knowledge of how important dance is in different contexts. You (as a dancer) are aware *that* it exists but barely *where* it exists and certainly not *why* it exists. I think understanding outreach work has changed for me. If someone had asked me what its purpose was (the Education Department at BRB) I would have said at one time - 'To develop future audiences'- it would have been as basic as that before the course, and I think that would have been the opinion of a large chunk of the Company. (D8)

I'd done education work for three or four years and suddenly you realise why you are doing it and how it came about And being able to write what you are thinking – to formalise your thoughts ... to have opinions and to be able to speak them too - and not be scared to say what you think ... because as a dancer you don't - you say things with your body - you are used as a piece of putty for the Company -just a body really - not actually free-thinking individuals ... (D10)

Some of the most popular aspects of the course have been those that provided different frameworks and perspectives with which to view their art form, career and lifestyle. Beginning philosophical interrogation of important questions related to the value of the Arts, and exploring relationships between art forms, gave dancers time and space to reflect on more generic issues shared by the arts.

They also enjoyed the introduction to using sociological frameworks, with a focus on equity issues and implications for their professional world and many went on to explore

these issues in their final dissertations. Research topics were wide-ranging and included: disordered eating, the ageing dancer and mismatch in artistic / technical maturity, careers of dancers, political issues in 'democratising dance', dancers' self-esteem, and developing a 'dance psychology'. The high quality of work produced is testimony to the potential of opening higher education to mature, professional artists. In his final report as external examiner for this programme over a four year period, Christopher Bannerman (2001) commended the extension to knowledge that the student work, particularly the dissertations, represented:

I know of no other analysis of dance practice which is of equal breadth and depth, either nationally or internationally. This has been made possible by the involvement of practitioners, who have been empowered by higher education and who have now provided scholars with an unparalleled insight into the world of dance.

This is testimony to the Dearing agenda, perhaps most specifically to insistence that:

UK higher education must ... sustain a culture which demands disciplined thinking, encourages curiosity, challenges existing ideas and generates new ones.

Brophy, Craven and Fisher (1998: 25)

OUTCOMES

Outcomes are still unfolding and will continue to do so for many years as the graduate dancers move on with their lives. The two main channels through which the value of the

programme can be evidenced at this point are through benefits and changes in the Company and through benefits and changes in the lives of participating dancers.

a) The Company

The innovative nature of the degree programme contributed to the Company receiving a Breakthrough Award from the Arts Council of England with the Regional Arts Boards in December 2000. Awards were given for ‘energy, vision and innovation’ and specifically to Birmingham Royal Ballet for:

... its pioneering professional development programme for dancers ... The degree programme the Company has developed in partnership with the University of Birmingham, Westhill, provides a model for the sector as a whole. The expertise of the first graduates and students on the degree programme is already feeding into the Company’s work.

(ACE Breakthrough Awards announcement December 15th 2000)

Part of the award was used to fund the setting up of an IT study room which the students and other Company members find very useful. The award was also used to fund research into providing other CPD opportunities for Company members, whilst the remainder was used to provide professional development placements for MA graduates in the Education Department.

From the perspective of the current education director, the most important development within the Company has been a culture shift in terms of the status and value afforded to education work, attributed by her, largely to the degree programme. In 1997, when the first

cohort joined the University, freelancers delivered education projects. Most dancers and senior staff were distant from the work in terms of participating, contributing and valuing its potential. When a structural reorganisation took place in 2000 and the position of 'education director' replaced the former 'head of education' (the title itself indicative of a shift in status), shortly before the graduation of the first cohort, the newly appointed director said:

What the degree programme gave me, coming into the Company, was a core of dancers who understood what this work was about, who were already beginning to ask – why don't we do this? ... The dancers grabbed the idea and ran with it.

Without the degree there would not have been the dancers with the confidence and interest to make it happen, that's the big difference. As they have begun to deliver the education programme the feedback into the Company, at all levels, and the impact on the dancers doing that work has become really apparent to the ballet staff. So it becomes a cycle and they are valuing it much more ... Now the staff are absolutely convinced of the value and are bending over backwards (with scheduling etc) to enable the dancers to deliver it.

The upward spiralling of the work of the education department has been enhanced by the raised profile and reputation of the Company in education and community contexts where the more public accessibility of its professional dancers has increased demand for projects and links. Not only are the graduate dancers spreading an enthusiasm for education work throughout the Company, they are continuing to develop their skills and expertise within the Education Department team, gaining wider experience and skilling themselves for alternative futures post-performing careers. In addition to delivering projects they also contribute ideas to planning and innovation. In 2002 four graduates led a Birmingham

Royal Ballet / Gallery 37 Chicago collaborative project called Café Atlantic, based on David Bintley's *'Still Life' At the Penguin Café*. This was a Company / community / education project involving many participants of all ages in a live video-linked performance between the twinned cities of Birmingham and Chicago. The project won a City Lifelong Learning Award for value and originality in artistic / technological enterprise. These achievements illustrate ways in which the Company is maximising the skills of the graduates in new directions:

Gone are the days when organisations thought they could rely on an ... elite to "lead" whilst others merely "followed". They now recognise that they have to make the best possible use of all available talent if they are to compete successfully in rapidly changing global markets. Harnessing all available brain power is vital for economic survival and success.

CIHE Working Group (1997: 1)

The Company has extended personal and professional development opportunities for the graduates. One retired from performing and gained a twelve-month placement opportunity in the Education Department via the Breakthrough Award. This not only extended her own professional development, contributing to her securing a prestigious post as Learning Manager at the Royal Opera House, but also contributed much to the Company during the year. A 'pilot post' has been created for another graduate who wanted to keep performing and extend his work in education, particularly in the area of young people with special needs. The management agreed to a shared position that enabled him to block time to gain experience in education and also to continue performing. The complexity of negotiating such a position around issues such as repertory, fitness levels and rehearsal schedules, would have been '... unthinkable three years ago ... this is one of the most radical things

to happen at BRB' (director of education). It has enabled him to keep performing and gain some valuable education experience, particularly in project management, at his request.

b) The Dancers

Characteristically, adults return to learn with clarity of purpose and high motivation ... Their own experience takes them in particular directions and they gain confidence about their own views and values.

(Carlton and Soulsby (1999:5)

The dancers have articulated their own personal growth and empowerment during in-depth interviews:

I think I have a very much better awareness of what is going on outside of the very small world of being in a ballet company. (D2)

... it has been a lot more work than I thought it would be but it has actually woken me up rather than made me exhausted. (D9)

We've all said ... that it has changed the way we look at dance, the way we look at our background, -where we've come from and how it has shaped us, it is everything - we've never ever thought about it - it was just 'this is how it is'... like the gender issues - how feminists look at ballet ... things that had never occurred to me. (D2)

Learning through this degree has changed my approach to dancing and it's more positive now ... I am able to work more consistently and calmly ... It has organised

the rest of my life. I think it's confidence and it's also (learning that) it is worth it if you are getting something out of it. At the end of each assignment there was a sense of achievement and a sense of where to go to ...

I felt more secure. Dancing isn't everything to me anymore ... if I broke my back tomorrow I know there are other things I could do - but before - I didn't know what I could do ... it has changed me. (D9)

For some dancers the personal development and self-esteem gained through the course is sufficient evidence of its value. One attributed her promotion to Principal dancer to the self-confidence gained through the degree programme. She has also presented at an international symposium on Dance and Medicine in Finland in 2001 and published her research. Two other former Principal dancers and first cohort members have relocated and are building strong artist / community / education links in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

At this point it is possible to recognise second career opportunities which have been made possible through the degree programme. In addition to the person gaining the position at the Royal Opera House, mentioned above, another graduate was recently offered a dance post in a Texas University. Others are being supported in their quests to move into diverse directions within and beyond the Company. The marketing department has agreed to offer a training placement to a current student, who is about to finish her performing career, subject to her successive completion of the B.Phil programme and the securing of funds. Another, whose career has been stopped through injury, has a place on an intensive teacher-training course at the Royal Academy of Dance, a career he would not have considered if he had not worked with children on this course:

I began to understand the power of dance and its impact on people's lives, especially children's ... Through this study I am better prepared for the oncoming change in my professional life. I believe it will help me to be a better ballet teacher and person..." (D12)

Dancers have so much to offer when their performing lives are over yet many are lost since they fail to recognise the potential they embody. The knowledge, skills and qualities they do possess are well summarised by Deborah Bull (1998: 13):

Dancers know better than anyone else what it feels like to dance, the commitment it takes, how our working lives should be structured, what kind of support we need ... We have unparalleled self-discipline, a terrifying level of dedication and true insight into the work we do and the courage it takes to do it ...

The challenge, then, is to find ways to support each retiring dancer in finding the right 'next step' in life. Entering further and higher education offers one place where there is time for reflection, learning, recognition of personal worth and acquisition of new skills, a place to grow.

CONCLUSION

For a ballet company to open its doors to higher education for dancers is courageous because education changes people, brings criticism and new vision. Evidence from the first five years suggests that dancers embarking on this opportunity to enter higher education with the University of Birmingham have benefited in many ways and are contributing much at the interface of artists and education. With the Government identifying the

Creative Industries, including the performing arts, as “The fastest growing sector in the UK, generating revenues approaching £60bn and employing more than 1.4 million people” (Luton, 2000), the degree graduates will continue to find ways to use their newly acquired cultural capital. Most will be in the position of continuing to invest their lives in the Arts world to maximise the wealth of knowledge and skills accumulated.

As mentioned at the beginning, there is currently a political commitment, in government and the Arts Council, to improve Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for artists. Government’s commitment to lifelong learning and widening participation in further and higher education can provide the door to extending and developing more opportunities for experienced professional artists who would like to enter higher education. The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) produced the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) Report (1999: 61) that mentioned the BRB model as an exemplar:

New modes of training should be developed for artists in education which offer venue-based practical training, a mixture of accreditation options and residency planning. Current modes of collaboration between cultural organisations and HEI's (Higher Education Institutions) such as the one between the Birmingham Royal Ballet and Westhill ... could be taken forward into the field of continuing professional development ... The Birmingham Royal Ballet provides degree-level studies for dancers in the Company ... Good practice in this area should be exemplified and built on.

Whilst the rhetorical climate is good for expanding opportunities for dancers and all artists in further and higher education, the reality of facing the current financial crisis and under-resourcing in the UK's Universities would suggest caution in optimism. Whilst the 'Specialist Schools' movement has increased opportunities for young people to study dance in well-resourced secondary (11 – 18 years) 'sports' and 'performing arts' colleges, dance in higher education continues to be vulnerable, with recent cuts in courses and opportunities across the country. It is important, then, to end on a positive note. The initiative to provide a partnership degree programme between Birmingham Royal Ballet and the University of Birmingham has made a positive difference:

To the Company through:

- imaginative continued support for, and use of, graduates;
- enhancement of the status of the education department and outreach work.

To the wider education and dance / arts world through:

- contributing more critical thinkers to the world of professional dance;
- stimulating breadth and depth of original research from practitioners;
- skilling dancers to be better informed artists in education and community contexts;
- pioneering a higher education study model which has been successful.

And to the dancers through:

- empowering individuals;
- broadening and deepening knowledge, skills and understanding;

- enhancing life-chances, including qualifications for better second careers.

Judging narrative discourses in terms of an academic credibility based on positivistic criteria such as reliability and validity is inappropriate in the qualitative domain and is the subject of ongoing debate in social science (Richardson 1993, 2000, Sparkes 1995, 1998, 2000, 2002, Wolcott 1994). I hope that the reader will judge the integrity of this paper on its coherence, authenticity, intrinsic and academic professional interest.

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BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

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